



Despite a need for more senior housing, New Rochelle scraps senior zoning policy

David Propper Rockland/Westchester Journal News

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The New Rochelle City Council scrapped a zoning clause originally intended to attract more senior housing to the city.

Amid the need for more senior living communities in New Rochelle and Westchester County in general, the senior citizen overlay zone was unanimously eliminated during a council meeting Tuesday night.

Originally approved in 2017, the overlay zone provided developers the chance to build senior housing projects in residential zones, including single-family zones, assuming the proposals met requirements. It's that ability to build near single-family homes drew some opposition.

Losing the overlay zone would make constructing multi-family senior housing more difficult, critics say. But proponents of its elimination argue senior housing communities would be out of place in neighborhoods with mostly single family homes affecting those residents' quality of life.

"It hasn't killed the idea of senior housing in New Rochelle at all. It prevented it from being randomly placed anywhere in the city," Councilman Ivar Hyden said prior to the meeting. "Including right in the middle of a residential neighborhood, I think it's unfair to the people living there."

After several years, potential developers seeking to build senior housing in New Rochelle have been unable to satisfy the overlay zone's requirements making the zoning law "severally limited," according to a memo from the city development department to council members.

"Accordingly, in order to better communicate to the development community, it is recommended that this provision be eliminated from the code," according to the city staff memo.

Kathleen Gill, interim development commissioner, said senior housing would fit better in other areas of the city rather than in single-family zoning.



Losing the overlay zone could reduce where senior housing can be built in New Rochelle, Gill said, but she noted those types of developments are still possible in the multi-family districts and in the city's growing downtown.

"The approval process for everything is simpler within the downtown by design," Mayor Noam Bramson said in an interview Monday. "That's the area where we want to encourage growth whereas outside the downtown core we lean toward preservation."

If eliminated, a developer could still petition the city anytime for a zoning change.

Gill, who is also the city's corporation counsel, said there are no plans to create another senior citizens zone, which is in conflict with a recommendation made by the Westchester County Planning Board, in a Feb. 19 letter to the city.

The county planning board stated while it understands New Rochelle's reason for throwing the overlay zone out, the board encouraged the city to conduct a study exploring how to bring in more senior housing.

"The creation of multifamily senior citizen housing is an important need within both New Rochelle and the County as a whole," the county planning board wrote. "All such developments should not be required to petition for individual zoning amendments."

'Different levels of scrutiny'

Former city councilman Barry Fertel said the senior citizen overlay zone approved in 2017 was to encourage more senior housing in New Rochelle. There is a shortage of that housing right now, he noted.

"Which would serve a need that needs to be satisfied," said Fertel, who retired from public service last year.

The overlay zone was controversial when it was enacted, with the council passing it 4-3. That zoning amendment came at the same time a project was proposed to bring a memory care senior development to Coopers Corner on Mill Road near the Eastchester border. The project is the site of former Coopers Corner Nursery, which closed in 2015.

The Coopers Corner project would not be affected, according to city officials. Michael Glynn, manager partner of Monarch Communities, said in an email Monarch is committed to completing the project and has begun developing the site.

Monarch took over the project from National Development. The Coopers Corner project is the only site where the overlay zone was successfully applied.



Hyden and Albert Tarantino, two council members who opposed the measure last time and are still on the council, approved its erasure Tuesday.

Tarantino said days prior to the meeting the overlay zone could adversely affect single-family neighborhoods. If a developer purchased enough properties, they could meet the criteria for senior housing, he said.

"They would not really fit well into, but would be allowed because of the zoning," Tarantino said, later adding. "We felt what the city was doing with that zoning change was adjusting things to accommodate a developer and that's not how you zone."

Tarantino's not against senior citizen developments, but does not want them placed in areas that would hurt nearby residents.

Hyden said the overlay zone creates potential problems "all over the city."

Bramson, who supported the overlay zone in 2017, said removing the zone now would allow officials to further scrutinize proposals. He voted for its elimination.

"With the overlay, approval is not guaranteed. Without the overlay, rejection is not guaranteed," Bramson said. "It's just different levels of scrutiny. The overlay eases the approval process whereas without the overlay the approval process is a little more intensive."

Wilmot Road development

One proposed project that would be affected by the reversal is Wilmot Lakeside Living, which would be a 190-unit assisted living development on 11 acres of land on Wilmot Road near the Eastchester/Scarsdale border. Part of the development team is KOSL, which had its company's vice president voice support for the overlay zone during a public hearing last Tuesday.

Oran Ben-Simon, also a New Rochelle resident, said getting rid of the overlay zone would impede efforts to provide sustainable housing to seniors. Ben-Simon was one of several residents against its elimination, arguing New Rochelle seniors want local housing options to remain in the city.

"Our intentions were to aid a large and growing City with the ability to accommodate their residents while remaining consistent with their legislative intent and meeting their goals," Ben-Simon stated.

The project has received some pushback from nearby residents. An online petition against the project has garnered just under 500 signatures.

"By its nature, it is totally out of character and wholly inappropriate for this neighborhood and will markedly detract from the neighborhood's living quality," part of the petition reads.

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Resident Joseph Tait, who wants to see the overlay zone discarded, said any proposed senior citizen project should be judged on its own merit.

"We believe zoning and planning board rules prior to the enactment of the senior citizen overlay zoning were sufficient and provided ample time for neighborhood input," Tait said.

The lack of senior housing is not just a New Rochelle problem.

Westchester County Association President and CEO Michael Romita said with the county's population is "greying," municipalities should have a plan to welcome more senior housing communities.

"You can't have a healthy and equitable community if older residents are forced to move because they are squeezed out of viable housing options," Romita said.

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